

## SEARCH AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC POET, WALT WHITMAN'S 'LEAVES OF GRASS'

**Dr. Smita R. Deshmukh**

Principal,  
Shri Shivaji Arts and Commerce College,  
Amravati, Maharashtra, India.

### Abstract

*One of the great innovative figures in American letters, Walt Whitman created a daringly new kind of poetry that became a major force in world literature. The collection is considered as one of the world's major literary works and stands as a 'search for identity' and 'revolutionary development' in poetry. 'Leaves of Grass' was first published on the American day of Independence. Whitman's specific purpose in Leaves of Grass, was to encourage readers to pursue: the creation of 'precious return' as he called it, the return of personal love and affection for himself. He wished the reader to struggle with Leaves of Grass. He became keenly aware that the tools necessary for his emergence as the new, democratic poet were at his disposal. He believed, he could bring poetry to the common people, and with the publication of Leaves of Grass, he assumed the role of the American Poet, referring to himself as "one of the roughs," a common man.*

**Keywords:** *Leaves of Grass. Walt Whitman, Search for identity,*

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### Introduction:

The name Walt Whitman has become synonymous with poetry. Whitman defines *Leaves of Grass*, as an attempt of a naïve, masculine, affectionate, contemplative, sensual, imperious person to cast into literature not only his own grit and arrogance, but his own flesh and form, entrapped, regardless of models, regardless of modesty or law; and ignorant, as at first it appears of all outside of the fiercely loved land of his birth.

Whitman's most celebrated work, *Leaves of Grass*, was the only book, he ever wrote, and he took a lifetime to write it. A large assortment of poems, it is one of the most widely criticized works in literature, and one of the best loved works as well. Whitman was unmarried and childless, and it has been noted that *Leaves of Grass* consumed him greatly.

James E. Miller Jr. writes:

"...he guided his poetic offspring through an uncertain, hesitant childhood, a lusty young manhood, and a serene old age... It is difficult to write the life of Whitman without writing instead of the life and times of his book...Whitman was the kind of parent who lives his life through his child."

Walt Whitman's '*Leaves of Grass*' is the fulfillment of American Romanticism. In 1855, at thirty-six years of age, Whitman published his first small volume *Leaves of Grass* making a radical departure from all his previous methods of writing and from that time on, he followed an entirely new trail. He spent the rest of his life re-writing it and building it up into a great autobiography. The "poetic offspring" is of course *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman

poured his soul into the work, as he questioned himself and observed his demeanor through his writing. He “fathered” the tome, as after its initial publishing, Whitman went on to release revision after revision as time progressed. The collection is considered one of the world's major literary works and stands as a revolutionary development in poetry: Whitman's free verse and rhythmic innovations stand in marked contrast to the rigid rhyming and structural patterns formerly considered so essential to poetic expression.

Whitman was a firm believer in democracy and much in *Leaves of Grass* gives us a clear vision of his belief that American ideals might serve as an example to the world. He greatly admired Abraham Lincoln as an exponent of these ideals, and upon Lincoln's death he wrote, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd". Lincoln died in April 1865, and so the blooming lilacs not only remind him of the death of Lincoln, but also serve as a metaphor for the eternal renewal of life. Although in the post Civil War period, he became somewhat disillusioned with the aggressive materialism and corruption of a rapidly changing, industrializing society, he maintained a firm belief that eventually ideals would triumph over greed. His work is less a logical discourse than it is a spontaneous outpouring of emotion. It is from emotion that it derives its power. At times, Whitman reached not for cosmic, transcendental levels, but dealt with the elemental and intimate, on a purely emotional level. His bold feelings about love and sexuality as evidenced in such poems as "A Woman Waits for Me" and "Once I Walked through a Populous City" are found in "*Children of Adam*" are absolutely remarkable in the context of the Victorian society in which he lived. So then these rank 'Leaves' have sprouted afresh and in still greater abundance.

*Leaves of Grass* is a highly self-conscious and carefully crafted achievement wherein the poet used numerous materials from his family history, his life on Long Island, his travels and observations across the country and his experiences before and after the Civil War which haunted him throughout his life.

When Whitman published his first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on or around the fourth day of July in 1855, he believed he was embarking on a personal literary journey of

national significance. Setting out to define the American experience, Whitman consciously hoped to answer Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1843 essay, "The Poet," which called for a truly original national poet, one who would sing of the new country in a new voice. This optimism and confidence resulted largely from his awareness of the tremendous changes in the American literary world that had taken place during his lifetime.

The letter to Whitman from Ralph Waldo Emerson commence as a private note of encouragement from Emerson, a well-known poet and philosopher, to an obscure journalist at the beginning of his poetic career. Emerson's letter as well as an open letter to him written by Whitman was then printed in an appendix to the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Among the most famous sentences in American literature, is Emerson's greeting to Whitman after reading *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855, with only twelve poems. He praised the poems as **'the wonderful gift and the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom'** that America contributed. In addition, Whitman printed on the spine of the book. **"I greet you at the beginning of a great career. R.W. Emerson"**. Whitman responded to him,

"I was simmering, simmering and simmering,  
Emerson brought me to boil."

Over the course of Whitman's life, the book reappeared in nine versions, expanded and transformed as the author's experiences and the nation's history changed and grew. Whitman's ambition was to create something uniquely American. In that he succeeded. His poems have been woven into the very fabric of the American character. From his solemn masterpieces "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly rocking" to the joyous freedom of "Song of Myself," "I Sing the Body Electric," and "Song of the Open Road," Whitman's work lives on, an inspiration to the poets of later generations. In 'Starting from Paumanok' the poet summarizes his themes as the greatness of love democracy and the greatness of Religion.

In the preface to 1876 edition, Whitman describes that the general objective of writing the *Leaves of Grass* is to know how real human being, himself or herself is. He remarks in his preface,

“*Leaves of Grass*' indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature--an attempt, from first to last, to put a Person, a human being (Myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record.”

At the time of Whitman's birth in 1819, the Constitution and the democratic ideas upon which the country was founded were only a generation old; America was a land of seemingly unlimited space, resources, and possibilities, yet a land with no cultural roots to call its own. In 1820, a year after Whitman's birth, Sydney Smith of Britain's Edinburgh Review was prompted to ask, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?" But the period between Smith's remark and the publication of Whitman's first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 was one of remarkable and unprecedented changes in America, particularly in the world of books.

By 1855, America could boast one of the world's largest and most advanced publishing industries, producing distinctly "American" books by authors such as Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, Fuller, Thoreau, and Emerson. The amazing growth of American literature and of the supporting publishing industry was the result of a self-conscious effort by authors and publishers to establish for America a literary culture of its own. The resulting increase in, or rather the sudden appearance of, authorship in this country was made possibly only through American ingenuity, innovation, and technology in publishing.

A great sensation was made by appearance in the first place, of an original-looking volume, a homespun affair, a thin quarto of ninety five pages, printed in large type, and bearing on its title page no name of any publisher, but only the words *Leaves of Grass*, Brooklyn, New York, 1855. The book was not 'published' in the official sense. Being a printer by trade, Whitman had set up the type and done all the press work with his own

hands. The title page of the original edition of *Leaves of Grass*, instead of author's name, was embellished with the portrait of the Walt Whitman in shirtsleeves and wearing a hat tilted at a raffish angle.

As he revised and enlarged *Leaves of Grass*, nine editions and numerous printings appeared between 1855 and 1891-92, his goal as the self-styled national poet became more clearly defined. He designed his book to be read by the individual in private to reach core of meaning. The basic mode of discourse is a conversation between Whitman and readers. He has intricate purpose of finding the meaning of the Being. It is also to be read aloud, preferably out- of - doors.

Whitman's self assurance that the structure of the *Leaves of Grass* embodied his vision is suggested by authorizing it, after some twenty- five years of constant revision, to stand unchanged for the last ten years of his life. He wanted that structure preserved and perpetuated is certain, he made for future. As a result of constant revision, shifting and ordering material in successive editions, Whitman imparted to his masterpiece a coherent form and structure. The *Leaves of Grass* as it stands at present has a well- marked structural wholeness.

The cluster of poems opening the *Leaves*, "inscription" and the following long poem, 'Starting from Paumanok' and 'Song of Myself' form the introductory portion of the book. In these poems the poet summarizes his themes as the greatness of Love and Democracy, and the Greatness of religion. These terms provide the key to the three major parts of the *Leaves*, 'Children of Adam', 'Calamus', 'Birds of passage', 'Sea-drift', 'By the Road Side'. These poems take their unity from their overall dedication to the sketching of a new world personality, a new conscious selfhood that provides a model for America and modern man. This section of *Leaves of Grass* provides the outlines of the epic hero of democracy.

'The New World personality', the hero of the epic of democracy which was given birth and personal identity in the first part, is related in the second part, to a particular historical moment, a moment of crisis in the life of the nation. The crisis is the crisis of the

civil war and hero is put to the test and purify thereby. This second part comprises clusters entitled 'Drum Taps', 'Memories of President Lincoln', and 'Autumn Rivulets'. The poetry of this part is topical, closely related with particular national events and personalities.

The third part of the *Leaves* begins with the cluster, 'Proud Music of the Storm', and ends with, 'Whispers of the Heavenly Death'. The poems of this section all bridge the way from Life to Death. The poet is face to face with death either in a dream or through direct contemplation.

In the fourth part, the *Leaves of Grass* consist of the sections, 'From Noon to Starry Night', 'Song of Parting'. All of the poems deal, directly or indirectly, with death; and number of brief poems establish an intimacy between the reader and poet, as he bids goodbye. The cluster ends with 'So Long'.

At last the poet added two Annexes, the first called, 'Sands at Seventy', and the second, 'Goodbye My Fancy'. These clusters are mere additions, essentially superfluous to the main structure. Thus the '*Leaves of Grass*' has a coherent structure having both thematic and structural unity. James Miller, the critic, has this to say of Whitman's curiosity towards life, particularly about his own meaning in the world in which he live:

"Like any individual of depth and complexity, Whitman was continuously curious about who he was... (He had) a lusty enthusiasm, a hearty relish for life lived at all times to its fullest intensity."

Perhaps the most cherished single poem within '*Leaves of Grass*' is "Song of Myself." It is the opening poem in fifty- two clusters or group of long lines closely related with each other. This collection of the poems is the most recognized work of Whitman's writings. It sets the tone as Whitman makes a profound reflective statement:

"I celebrate myself, and what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

With this opening proclamation of his own life's study, Whitman encompassed the reader into his life's observation as he answers the question "What is the grass?"<sup>7</sup> using long and descriptive stanzas to interject the feeling of wonder he had about his everyday life. James Miller comments on "Song of Myself":

By far the best, as well as the longest poem was the opening 'Song of Myself.'

Like no other poem in American literature—indeed unlike any poem ever written before anywhere— "this long self-centered and prophetic chant...seemed designed too shock and startle surprise and disturb."

## Conclusion:

It is not known how American Democratic poet, Walt Whitman hit upon its title *Leaves of Grass*, but it is certainly apt and suggestive. 'Grass' symbolizes "search and Quest for 'identity' democracy; it grows not only in single blades but also in clusters. Similarly in democracy each individual is important separately, but he or she also acquires added significance from massive grouping. In the book each leaf or poem is important individually. In the art or the plan of the book, like others, Whitman makes the central figure, but he appears not only physiognomically, but psychologically and physiologically.

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